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# The Workshop

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## FILIGREE.\*

By

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The Chinese filigrees, to begin from the furthest East, are of extraordinary delicacy, but without any distinct ornamental design. The silver threads form a groundwork resembling a net with thick meshes. In this netlike ground are set a number of enamelled silver-flowers, a kind of ornamentation which scarcely occurs elsewhere. All sorts of naturalistic flower and leaf ornaments also are made by the Chinese from their silver-filigree. To this class belongs a kind of goldfiligree which in delicacy almost rivals the antique, but is altogether different from it in style. It consists of bracelets, earrings, brooches, generally forming a complete set, and sometimes combined with medallions cut of the beaks of certain birds, or claws of tigers. They make smaller or larger disks, the basis of which, surrounded by a thicker wire, consists of a fine network of goldfiligree, and on them are fitted in high relief and in naturalistic treatment, birds, serpents or other animals in animated positions. Together with the foliage or branches on which they sit they are *à jour*, and made out of the most delicate golden threads, and constitute a most charming ornament.

The Indians also are of extraordinary skill in filigree-work, as are the Malays of Sumatra and Java. These too, like the Chinese, are naturalistic in their treatment, making necklaces of flowers and leaves, bracelets of serpents biting their own tails in delicate network *à jour* but without much merit as to form. Besides which they produce a rough silverornament, which only comes into the category of filigree as set with rows of silvergrains. The gold filigrees of the Malays are sometimes of extra-

ordinary delicacy, but strikingly deficient in originality of motive.

Egypt and the countries further up the Nile are now great places for filigree-work consisting chiefly of ornamental objects, and particularly of small coffee cups which as we know are used without handles and saucers in the East, and for the trays or salvers which carry them; even their coffee pots are frequently covered with filigree-work. Many other articles are covered with it, such as baskets, pieces of armour and pipes, so that filigree displays itself as the chief art in all the finer metalworks of those remote regions. In the threads and grains these works are seldom of much delicacy, but rather of a certain strength, being for the most part objects of daily use, but in contrast to the Chinese and Indian filigree they bear the stamp of a certain style in their design. The threads springing from a root, and twisting themselves right and left, take a kind of palmette pattern frequently repeated, and being supported by stems, may be applied to the decoration of larger surfaces, as for example, of the above mentioned trays or salvers. In Asiatic and European Turkey we meet also with several works in filigree of a similar character to the Egyptian.

The people to the South of the Danube, and particularly the Slavonians practice filigree-work, but not to the same extent as in Egypt or Turkey. Their productions are confined to all sorts of ornaments for the head, neck, arm and hand, such as pins, earrings, spangles, rings and crosses; the workmanship is of no especial delicacy, nor do they present any originality of design and shape. Such is also the case with the ornaments of the women of the Salzburg district, which are made, however, not by the peasants themselves, but by gold-

\* Concluded from page 337 ante.  
The Workshop. 1874.

smiths in Salzburg for this special purpose. Reitsamer is distinguished among them through his specimens in the different Exhibitions. Similar to these ornaments are those of the Dutch peasant women which are still worn in rich profusion. They too are manufactured by the goldsmiths of the towns, but are in many cases of much more original form than those of Salzburg or Slavonia. Still more varied are the filigree-works of Portugal, which in importance and employment seem to have passed beyond the stage of mere peasant ornament, and to have struck into the path of the Genoese workmanship. A very pretty and numerous collection in the Vienna Exhibition of some manufactures shows that the workmanship, although not patronized by great manufactories, is yet practised as a profession in the towns.

An essentially different position is taken by the Italian, and in part by the Scandinavian filigree manufacture. In Italy, as we have already seen, and also in Denmark and Sweden, filigree is an ancient tradition, and has been retained as a national ornament, particularly through the hands of peasant workmen, but it has now passed far beyond that standpoint.

It is difficult to hazard any opinion as to the age of the filigree-work of the North, for Norse history up to a certain period is lost in Myths while to the south of the Northern ocean and the Baltic everything has long been clearly known. The Swedish excavations have brought to light some wonderful and splendid gold ornaments, covered all over with the most delicate filigree, but it has not been determined with any degree of certainty what is the time or place of its manufacture, for it is too peculiar to be compared with any other of which the date is known. These enigmas of the Stockholm Museum have yet to find their interpreter.

A solution may perhaps be obtained from the manner in which the filigree is in the present day treated by the peasants of the North. Indeed, that of the islands of Denmark and Sleswick, which there too serves for the ornaments of the peasant women, has little peculiarity, and may perhaps be compared with similar works in Holland, just as in some other artistic productions, such as furniture and pottery, a relation seems to exist between the Netherlands and the Danish peninsula and its insular dependencies. But the Norwegian filigree bears, in great part at least, the distinctive characteristics of that of the Romanesque period, that is, it consists, like the latter, of thicker and broader threads, or rather bands, which have been granulated by the file. Other branches, also, of the old Northern art, the ornaments, for example, of the carved furniture and doors, of which many are still preserved, bear the stamp of, or at least show great similarity to the Romanesque style, but not without some influence arising from the North. The other kind of Norwegian filigree is less peculiar; it uses the more finely twisted and granulated threads, forming of them in pierced work, pictures of rosettes, buds &c.; the only original feature in the whole being a jingling set of little buds and rosettes hanging down, or little flat silver disks fastened by tiny chains to the principal piece, which is

generally some ornament for the ears, the head or the bosom. This is an old special peculiarity of the Norwegian filigree.

At present however, in Norway, this national filigree-ornament has been taken up by the modern goldsmiths, not only for the use of the people, but essentially as a modern ornament for the fashionable world. It became therefore of importance not only to modernise its form, but also to bring it quite into vogue. This attempt has been very happily and successfully made by a goldsmith of Christiania, Tostrup by name. He borrows from the popular ornament its style, and its general national form, but subjects it to a more conventional design, in which he is very successful, especially in those works which are composed of broader threads after the manner of the Romanesque. Tostrup makes use of both the before-mentioned methods of proceeding, and combines them with one another. In those articles where single diadems by their accuracy of design and simplicity of arrangement produce a truly classical effect, though the detail of the design has nothing in common with the antique, the filigree rests on silverplates, and is raised above their bright surface by the mat treatment and play of lights. Tostrup employs filigree also for many other ornamental objects. His productions, already long known in the North, have obtained a rich success in the Vienna Exhibition and gained for him a well deserved reputation. The present number of the Workshop gives numerous drawings of filigree-works from his studio.

Another goldsmith of the North, Christesen of Copenhagen, seems to be continuing his efforts to raise filigree once more to its rightful place in his art, though not so exclusively as Tostrup, nor with the same devotion to the specifically Northern manner. His splendid exhibition at Vienna, where the articles of ornament appear equally important with the larger silverworks, showed the filigree-work after the antique patterns, and with a leaning to the Northern motives; some specimens also were in gold while the material of the Norwegian filigree is exclusively of silver.

But in the imitation of ancient ornament Christesen is far surpassed by works of a similar kind from Italy. If indeed filigree has again come into fashion in the modern goldsmith's work, it is primarily to Italy that we are indebted for it. The German goldsmiths also of the present day employ filigree but almost solely for articles of ecclesiastical use. This revival stands in connexion with the efforts to reform church ornaments after mediæval patterns, efforts which have led besides to the re-introduction of Niello and Enamel. In chalices, ciboria, reliquaries and many other objects, filigree was very successfully turned to account especially by the Rhenish goldsmiths, but only in the Romanesque style. The technic and its application was confined to Church vessels. It was different in Italy.

We have already learnt from Benvenuto Cellini that in his time the peasant women of the plains round Florence adorned themselves with filigree-work. This was not the only district, but it was still more in the moun-

tainous parts, where the work became and still is the traditional national ornament. The South Kensington Museum has an excellent collection of such national ornaments from all parts of Italy, where filigree plays a conspicuous part. They consist of chains, diadems, necklaces, hairfasteners, crosses and much else, chiefly of antique origin, certainly none of the present time. Many of them are of exquisite workmanship and at the same time of high artistic effect, for example, the hair-pins of the Milanese women, which are so disposed in the hair that they surround the head like a halo. Not only is the technic of these works delicate, but the style is good and there is seldom any naturalistic treatment. Some such indeed is found in Cortina in the Friaul Mountains where the knobs of the hair-pins represent nosegays, every separate flower being modelled as much as possible after nature and soldered at the under part in the stems of the flowers to the pin. This genre may naturally be extended, as indeed it is, to the formation of larger nosegays which are set in small silver vases, and have no other object than to show the skill of the artist.

Into this naturalistic tendency Genoa itself, the principal seat of Italian filigree-work has, in a great degree, fallen. Here too this technic originally came into use merely as a national ornament, but has long since become a necessity for tourists, who are delighted to bring home from Italy souvenirs in the shape of caskets, boxes, baskets and other trifles. Sometimes *tour-de-force* pieces have been attempted, such as the Exhibitions of our times are wont to call forth. Thus, in the Austrian Museum at Vienna, are to be seen a few basket-shaped bowls or tazzas, belonging to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which have a diameter of several feet.

They are ornamented with spirals, flowers, rosettes of twisted and granulated threads, all pierced work but supported by a skeletonwork of strong silver fillets. The Genoese manufacture, and that of other places, Turin, for example, which have followed its lead, have passed beyond this mere production of fancy articles for tourists and are now occupied in the fabrication of a number of different objects of general utility, among which personal ornaments of all kinds hold the first rank. The material is almost exclusively of silver, frequently gilt. The artistic style is usually the original antique, formed by the twisting and bending of the threads, but the same

naturalistic treatment which we find in Cortina is practised here both for the ornaments and other objects. The skill of the artist often leads him astray into extravagancies, as for example, in the Vienna Exhibition, there was a bust of the Emperor Maximilian entirely of filigree, the appearance of which presented no other idea than that of a knitted and stuffed stocking.

If the filigree-work of Genoa and Turin has already become of much importance by its great extension, this is still more the case in an artistic sense with the imitations of the antique filigree by the family of the Castellani, goldsmiths at Rome. Their productions are ornaments of the noblest and most beautiful kind, with which, when successfully carried out, modern art has nothing to compare. Their task however was no light one, as may well be imagined from our description of Tuscan and Greek ornaments. They had not only to produce the extraordinarily fine grain of the antique, but to arrange it with the same regularity, and at the same time with the same freedom. Even the soldering presented a difficulty, for the fine grain very easily formed itself into small lumps and refused to take the velvet-like suppleness of the surface. At last however, after many years' experiments and difficulties the Castellani have been perfectly successful, with the assistance, as is well known, of workmen who in their remote mountain districts had retained the old traditions for the popular ornaments.

The goal which these Roman goldsmiths had set before their eyes has been happily reached, and their success fully acknowledged in the Exhibitions. But the manufacture has not stopped at this point. Several other goldsmiths, and we have seen in the person of Christesen of Copenhagen, that they are not all Italians, have followed their example. The delicate gold filigree of the antique has already found its application in many ornamental objects, especially in the setting and framing of jewels, cameos and small mosaics. If, in addition to this, we call to mind the successful progress made by Tostrup of Christiana, and the charming and varied Portuguese productions, we may well flatter ourselves with the hope that within a very short space of time filigree will again become a common ornament in the modern goldsmith's art.